

**Commencement 2009**  
**Faculty Address**  
**“EmPOWERed for Success”**

I consider it a great honor to have the opportunity to celebrate this special day with you, our 2009 graduates, together with your friends and family. Your presence here today is likely the result of many long hours of study, a lot of hard work, and numerous personal sacrifices, and I would like to personally congratulate all of you for the achievements that are being represented here tonight.

As a graduate of Cuesta College, there is no doubt that you have learned a great deal during your time here. Regardless of your field of study, whether it is automotive technology or architecture, music or mathematics, your instructors have helped you to master a number of specific concepts and skills. We refer to these as student learning outcomes, and assessing and measuring the extent to which you have achieved them is something we instructors look forward to with exceeding joy. (Not really...I just said that to make my dean happy.)

But there are some things I hope you have learned here at Cuesta that don't fit nicely onto a Scantron form. These other “outcomes” are less tangible, more difficult to measure, and yet may be the most significant instruments of success in whatever path the future holds for you.

The first of these is perseverance, which can be defined as a commitment to continue on a course in spite of difficulties, obstacles, or discouragement. John D. Rockefeller said, “*I do not think that there is any other quality so essential to success of any kind as the quality of perseverance. It overcomes almost everything, even nature.*” It is a simple fact that some things in life don't come easy. Many of the problems or situations we face are

less like a sprint and more like a marathon; success can only be achieved after a prolonged effort. Albert Einstein once said, *“It’s not that I’m so smart, it’s just that I stay with problems longer.”*

Perseverance does not necessarily mean avoiding failure. It means we push on in spite of failure. In the words of Julie Andrews, *“Perseverance is failing 19 times and succeeding the 20th.”* Now, hopefully no one here has failed a course 19 times, but the odds are that at least a few of you needed a do-over. Just this semester I had a student taking one of my classes for the second time. She had worked hard last fall, and was understandably disappointed to have to repeat the course. Mathematics was a real struggle for her, and earlier this semester things were once again looking somewhat bleak. But she kept at it, and when she found she had earned one of the top five scores on the last midterm, you should have seen the gleam in her eyes. I think she discovered the power of perseverance that day. I hope you, too, have learned to persevere.

The second “outcome” I hope you have achieved here at Cuesta is an aptitude for original thinking. Congressman Ron Kind once said, *“The single most important factor in determining America's success in the 21st century will be maintaining our ability to be an innovative and creative society.”* Many of the challenges we face as a society do not lend themselves to traditional methods. To solve an issue like global warming is going to take some original thinking by people who are able to lead us in unforeseen directions. I like the way Ralph Waldo Emerson put it when he said, *“Do not follow where the path may lead. Go, instead, where there is no path and leave a trail.”* Just be sure you have a good tick removal tool. (Okay, I made that last part up.)

The key to original thinking is having a deep understanding of the concepts, something I try to encourage in all of my classes. I recall a visit by one of my former calculus students who had transferred to another institution. She was taking second year calculus,

and they were covering partial derivatives. She was surprised that the students were content to simply memorize a bunch of procedures. No one ever discussed what these things represented or what they meant. I hope we have given you a thirst for understanding, a need to ask the deeper questions. I hope you have embraced the power of original thinking.

Now, persevering or path-breaking does not mean you have to go it alone. There are times when we need to rely on the support of others, which leads me to the third “outcome” - the ability to work together. Andrew Carnegie has said that teamwork “*is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results.*” There is strength in numbers. An individual strand of twine is easily broken. But take a bunch of strands, weave them together, and now you have a rope which can withstand a significant amount of force or stress.

Also, research has proven that students working in small groups tend to learn more of what is taught and retain it longer. For whatever reason, you learn better when you learn from each other. I remember a particularly compelling example of this involving an intermediate algebra student. She was failing the course, and we were discussing what else she might do to help her be more successful in the class. I suggested she try to find a study group to join, and gave her the names of a few students she might ask. She took my advice, and her performance on the following exams showed remarkable improvement. By the end of the semester she had brought her grade up from failing to a B. In fact, everyone in her study group registered for the next algebra class together so they could keep their group dynamic going. Clearly they had experienced the power of working together. I hope you have as well.

The fourth of these learning “outcomes” is excellence, which just happens to be our theme at Cuesta College this year. Pat Riley, a former Lakers coach, defined excellence

as “*the gradual result of always striving to do better.*” I think of the pole-vaulter who, after hours of intense training, finally clears the bar. The coach runs over, celebrates the accomplishment with a hearty slap on the back, and then proceeds to raise the bar up another two inches. Indeed, the road to success is often traveled in small increments.

Excellence does not mean you are an extraordinary person. Rather, excellence is ordinary people doing ordinary things extraordinarily well. This is not to say that being excellent means being perfect either. My esteemed colleagues, Jeff Grover and Robert Schwennicke, can attest that there are days when I return from class and announce that I’ve just set a new record – for the world’s worst lecture.

The power of excellence lies in the fact that it is a mindset, an internal drive independent of external circumstances or expectations. Steve Jobs said, “*Be a yardstick of quality.*” Successful people strive for excellence because they want to, not because they are asked to. Whatever the motivations are that drive you, I hope that excellence is among them.

The last lesson I hope you have learned here at Cuesta is the importance of relaxation. To quote a Jack Nicholson character, “*All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.*” Between the demands of work, school, family, and relationships, it can be difficult to find any time for play or relaxation. But maintaining a proper balance is essential to keeping your sanity and avoiding burnout. Sydney J Harris, a former journalist for the Chicago Daily News once said, “*The time to relax is when you don't have time for it.*”

Back when I was a graduate student at Cal Poly, my roommates and I were up late studying for final exams. We were all pretty stressed out and fatigued, having been at it most of the day. Feeling the need to lighten things up a little, my roommate Bill popped in an AC DC album and cranked it up to full volume. “Dunt, du-na-nunt, du-na-nunt...” Instantly we were all dancing around with our air guitars (we didn’t have Guitar Hero

back then), singing, and bouncing off the furniture. For a few brief minutes we celebrated, unrestrained, the simple joy of being alive, and it was just what we needed to keep us sane and keep us going. I would strongly recommend, however, that you not do this at two in the morning. Strangely, the girls next door did not seem to have the same appreciation for our little primal outburst.

What is it that gives you the power to keep going, to re-energize your batteries so to speak? Whatever it is, I hope you will remember the words of Samuel Butler, “*that one of the main aims in life is to enjoy it.*” I hope you will remember to take the time to relax.

Together, these five principles: **P**erseverance, **O**riginal thinking, **W**orking together, striving for **E**xcellence, and remembering to **R**elax, will give you the **P**OWER to succeed as you continue on your journey into the future. And wherever that road may lead you, I am confident that you, the 2009 graduates of Cuesta College, will make us proud.

Thank you, and once again, congratulations!